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ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact of the multiage classroom on second, third, and fourth graders in an Elkhart, Indiana elementary school. One classroom from each grade participated in the multiage classroom. The classroom of 70 students was combined for at least 1 afternoon per week during the 1995-96 school year. During February, the classroom was combined for four afternoons per week. Results indicated that students in the multiage group had better attendance than the general school population. To determine the effects of the multiage classroom on social skills, the teachers maintained a journal on six students who had not shown appropriate social behaviors in the regular classroom. A point system was implemented in which these students were rewarded with points for three desirable social skills. Four of the six target students demonstrated appropriate social skills during the time observed. Parents' responses to surveys suggested that the parents accepted the program and had a positive attitude toward it. At the beginning and end of the study period, children were surveyed orally on their attitudes to the multiage classroom. Results were mixed with regard to whether they liked to be in a multiage class. Sociometric techniques revealed that, across the time of the study, second and third graders' willingness to work with children of other ages increased, and the fourth graders' willingness declined. Appendixes contain the parent and student surveys. (KDFB)

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EFFECTS OF THE MULTIAGE CLASSROOM ON CHILDREN

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April 24, 1996

PS 02 2711

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EFFECTS OF THE
MULTI AGE CLASSROOM
ON STUDENTS

In our schools today, learning has become increasingly more difficult. Many students lack stability and come to school without the basic needs that are required for success. The nuclear family, in some instances, does not exist. Some children are frequently forced into learning situations before they are developmentally ready for it. This can lead to poor self-esteem and ultimately to possible academic failure and inappropriate social behavior.

Teaching today has also become increasingly more difficult. Expectations to cover an ever expanding curriculum in 180 days is a task very few professionals would want to undertake. Children are rarely given time to develop academically at their own rate. Long term goals are hard to have when often the teacher doesn't get to know the child and their learning style until much of the year has passed. On top of this, teachers and students are often isolated, not finding time to interact with other teachers and other aged children.

Educational reform of some kind is a must for children and teachers to capitalize on a positive educational experience. The multiage classroom allows children to develop and learn at their own rate. It takes the pressure off the student, as well as the teacher, to learn a curriculum in a set amount of time. Because a teacher will have more than one year with each child, no one is a prisoner of time. Learning is able to take place in a realistic setting where teachers' and student's strengths can be focused on.

Through the multiage approach, children can develop a sense of family, learn social skills, and gain a sense of belonging, which is needed to be a productive part of society.

RELEVANT RESEARCH

"Researchers say the best reason to switch (to multiage) is to provide developmentally appropriate instruction for all students (Black 1993)." Because students are able to progress

at their own rate, how well a student learns is stressed, rather than how long it takes. Many of our students come to school with such a wide range of developmental levels, experience, and needs that it is close to impossible to service them in the current structure.

"Spending three years with one teacher prevents children from falling through the cracks (Shanker 1991)." When a student is with the same group of teachers for more than one year, the teachers get to know the complete child better. They are able to document continuous progress over several years. This helps the child see that learning in school is a continuous process as they begin where they left off at the end of the year.

Bruce Miller, has spent time researching multiage classes. His conclusions were that "multiage classes are as effective as single grade classes in terms of academic achievement, and superior in terms of student attitudes towards school and self (Miller, 1989)." As educators we saw the strategies we were using weren't as effective as what we wanted them to be. Our students needed a different approach to learning. It is encouraging that the multiage approach has proven to be equal to the benefits of a graded program academically. It also appears to have added benefits.

OUR PROGRAM

Hawthorne Elementary School is an urban school in Elkhart, IN. The total population is over 500 students. It is a multi-cultural school consisting of 58% African American, 9% Hispanic, 33% White, and 2% other. Included in the make-up of the students are children from the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary which bring to us a variety of nationalities and experiences. The majority of students are transient and receive free or reduced lunches.

The children who were involved in this study were from second, third, and fourth grade traditional classrooms. One classroom from each of those grades participated. In this paper we will refer to the fourth graders as the elders, the third graders as the middlers, and the second graders as the youngers. The individual classes included students from the school's inclusion program, non-English speaking students, and a visually impaired student.

Since the beginning of the 1995-1996 school year, we have combined these 70 students for at least one afternoon each week. We have done many different types of activities together which included: a study of Italy, pumpkin carving, tye-dyeing shirts, and a Christmas program.

During the month of February, we were together four out of five afternoons each week from 12:30 p.m. until 2:15 p.m. for a study of dinosaurs. We participated in a variety of activities such as singing, sharing times, research reports, group projects, reading books, poetry, jokes, games, art projects, etc. At the end of the unit we celebrated with a Dinosaur Day where our students gave guided tours to students in our building, parents, and other adults. Each student was responsible for giving a presentation about one of the topics studied during the unit.

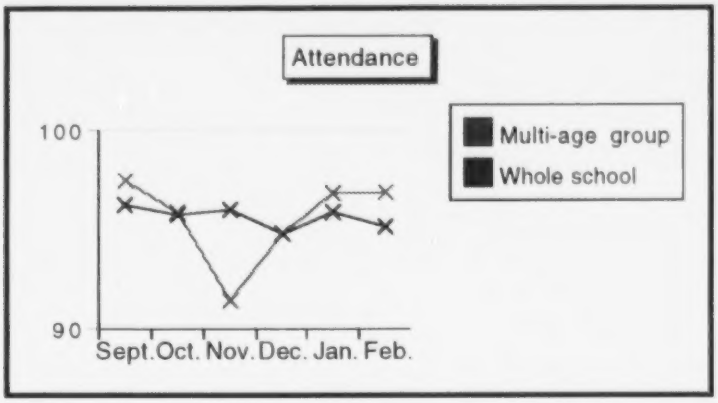
Throughout our research we looked at four questions: 1) Does attendance increase in a multiage classroom?, 2) Does a multiage class influence positive social skills in students?, 3) How do parents and students feel about a multiage classroom?, and 4) Do children of different ages choose to interact with each other?

QUESTION 1

The first question that we had was whether or not students in a multiage classroom would have better attendance than students in a non-graded classroom. We know that students need to be at school in order to learn.

We checked the attendance of our students for the months of September through February. We then found the average attendance. We also determined the average attendance of the entire school for those months.

Upon checking the attendance of our multiage students, we found our students' highest attendance was in September and February. (See graph 1.) We concluded that September's attendance is generally higher because school had just started. We also believed that February's attendance was higher because of our multiage experience. We noted that, except for November, the students in the multiage group had better attendance than the general school population.



QUESTION 2

Our second question was whether or not the multiage classroom would improve the social skills of students. We focused upon six students; a boy and a girl from each grade level. These students, from the beginning of the school year, had not shown appropriate social behavior in the regular classroom. (See Appendix A for a list of inappropriate behaviors.)

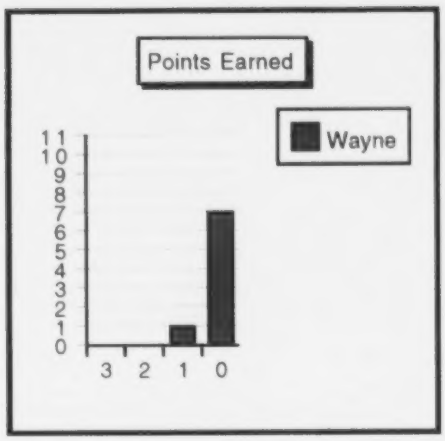
We kept a journal on each of the students during a thirty minute period where seventy children gathered for a daily beginning activity. We observed and kept a journal on a rotating basis. Anecdotal records were kept for a total of eleven days.

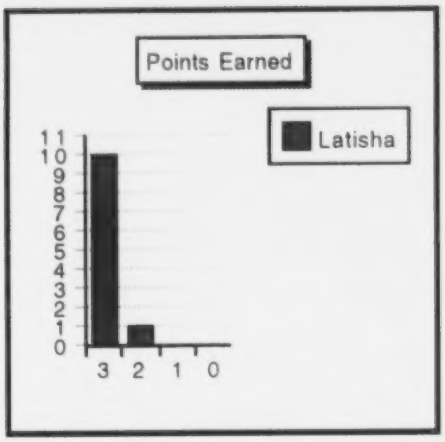
After collecting the data, we determined a criteria of three desirable social skills. They were: not disturbing others, giving attention to the person speaking, and participating appropriately in the given activity. These behaviors were ones that we felt were necessary for our students to be socially successful in life as well as in the classroom.

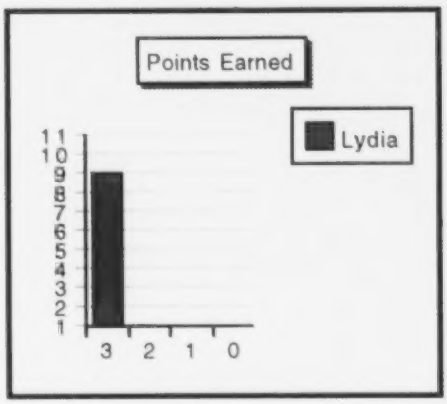
Each time a selected student displayed one of the acceptable behaviors, he/she received one point. He/she was able to earn a total of three points per day or a total of 33 points for the eleven days. We then calculated the percentage of days that each point value was earned. All of the students, except for Joshua*, were present eleven days.

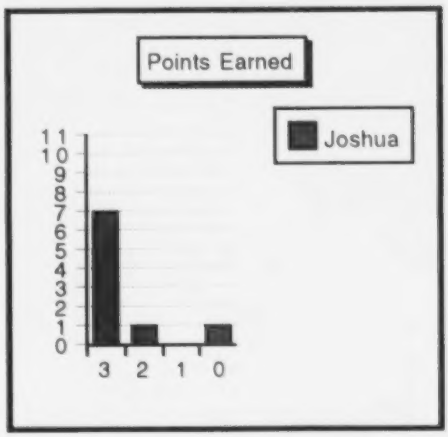
The anecdotal records showed that four out of the six targeted students demonstrated appropriate social skills during the time observed.

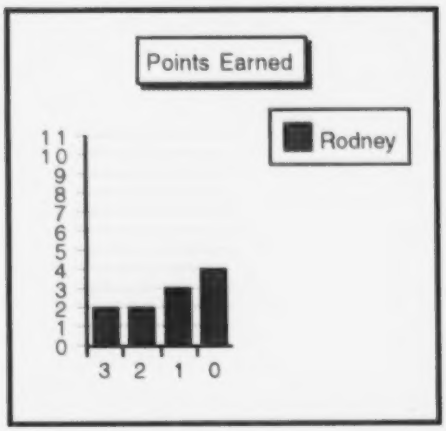
*Names have been changed.

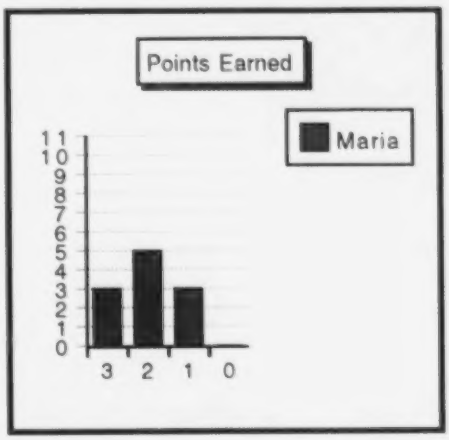

Points Earned
Wayne
11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0
3 2 1 0


Points Earned
Latisha
11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0
3 2 1 0


Points Earned
Lydia
11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
3 2 1 0


Points Earned
Joshua
11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0
3 2 1 0


Points Earned
Rodney
11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0
3 2 1 0


Points Earned
Maria
11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0
3 2 1 0

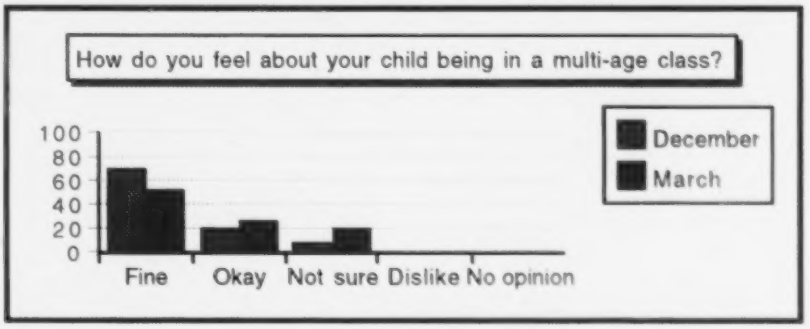
QUESTION 3

We also wanted to know how parents and students felt about the multiage class. A survey was given to a group of parents during a Christmas parent night. It asked parents what multiage activities their child had talked to them about, how their child felt about being in the multiage program, and how they themselves felt about their child being in the grouping. (See Appendix B for a copy of parent survey.)

We received 25 completed surveys. In March, after our dinosaur unit, we sent the same parent survey home with all of our students. This time we received 19 completed surveys.

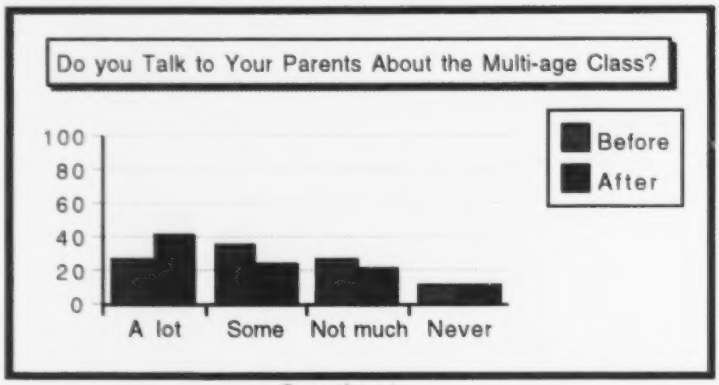
All surveys returned were anonymous. We did ask the parents to choose an identification number for their survey. Many of the surveys did not have such a number. The surveys that had numbers were not able to be paired. Therefore, we do not know if any parent filled the survey out twice.

We did not receive a large number of surveys, and we believe the ones returned represented two different groups of parents. In spite of this, we feel the survey did show that there was an overall acceptance and positive attitude towards the multiage program.

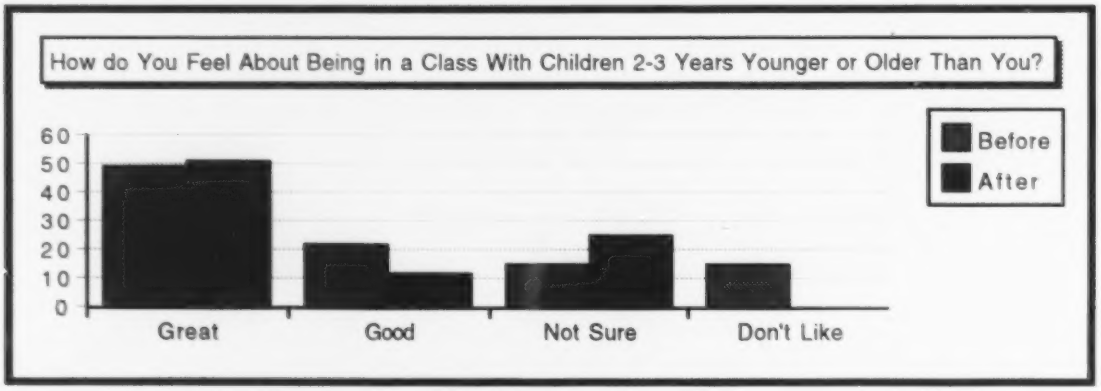


We were curious about how our students felt about multiage. At the beginning of our unit, we gave each student an opinion survey. It included questions about how much they talked to their parents about multiage, how the parents felt about their child participating in the program, how the student felt about being in the multiage grouping this year, and if they would want to be in this type of learning environment full time next year. We repeated the same survey again in March. Each time we read the questions aloud so that no child was at a

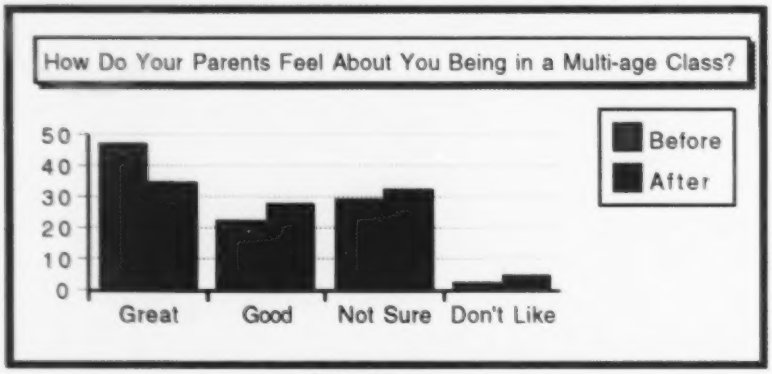
disadvantage. We also used pictures with words to help the children express their opinions. (See Appendix C for a copy.)



Question 1



Question 2



Question 3

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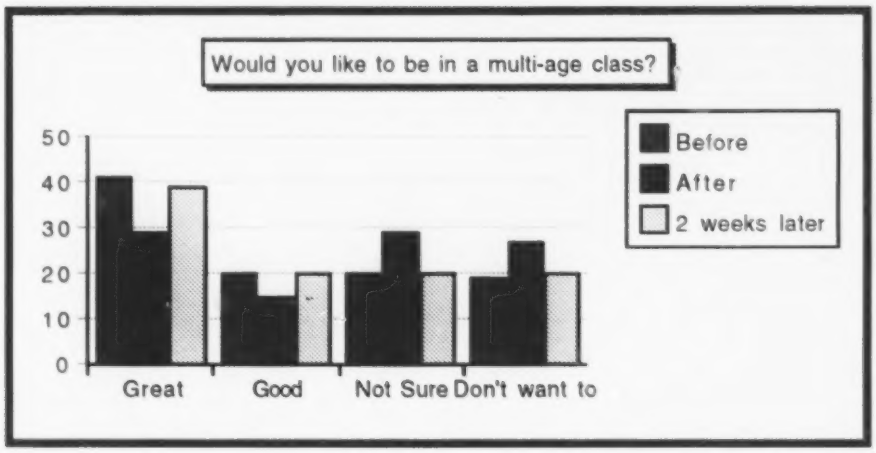


Question 4

We were surprised at these results, especially question number four, because quite often throughout the unit our students would ask us what we were doing next, and when we were getting together again. Overall, a lot of enthusiasm was shown.

Our confusion continued as we conducted twenty-five personal interviews with the students. One of the questions we asked was if they thought the multiage program was a good idea. A large majority of students responded with a resounding "Yes!"(See Appendix D for interview questions)

It was at this point we decided to redo the survey. This time the results agreed with the answers from the interviews, and also supported our conversations, and informal observations of the students. The students' interest in being part of a multiage class did increase.

QUESTION 4

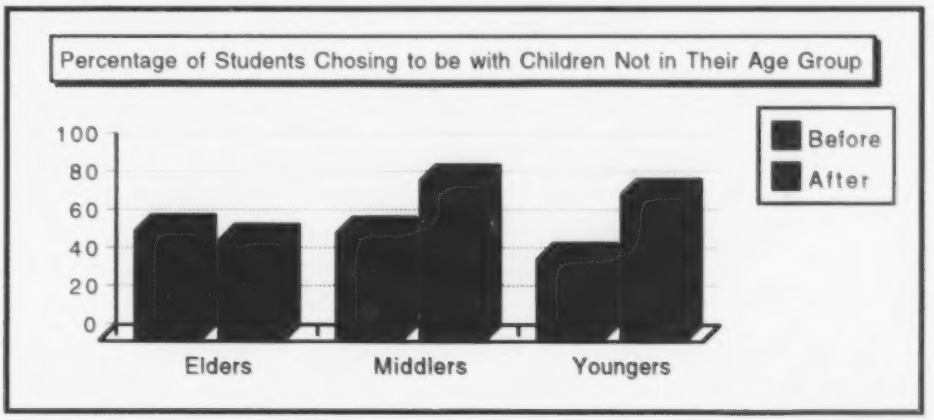
Our last question was whether or not children of different ages would choose to interact together. We did this because we wanted to know if children would feel comfortable in working with, being led by, and trusting children of different ages.

We created a sociogram with five questions for the students to answer. It was given to them at the beginning of the unit and after the unit was over. A list of all the students' names

was posted for all of the children to view. The five questions were: 1) Name three people you would like to sit by. 2) Who would you work on a project with if you both got the same award or punishment? 3) If you were stranded on a desert island, who would you like to be there with? 4) Who would you choose to lead you in an activity? 5) Who would you tell a secret to? (See Appendix E for copy of sociogram)

The questions were read aloud to the students. They were given three spaces for their choices. They did not have to fill in the three spaces if they did not choose to do so. They were to choose names from the given list.

The results of the sociogram showed that the willingness to work with other aged children increased with the middlers and youngers and slightly decreased with the elders.



Our interviews agreed with the sociogram. The students told us that they enjoyed working with children of different ages. In response to the question, "Do you think it would be a good idea to have a class like this?", a common response was that it was fun. They also said that they liked it when other children helped them to learn.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Since concluding our research, we have had time to reflect upon all the information that we generated. We were encouraged by what we learned. Through our research, we found that attendance of students was higher than the general population of the school, social skills

improved, parents and students had a positive attitude towards the program, and students developed multiage friendships.

Attendance for the classes during the unit showed improvement compared to the overall schools' attendance. We feel this is related to a positive classroom environment. When a classroom setting is positive we believe two things happen. The first is that the students' overall physical and mental health thrive. The second being that they want to come to school to be a part of that learning environment. We found our results to be supported by Jim Grant's research which states that there is improved student attendance and an increase in mental health benefits for children in a multiage setting. (Grant, 1995).

We were glad to see the attendance increase because we know that children need continuity to learn. There are less gaps in the student's learning if they are at school. The more days a child is present, the more a child learns.

We also observed that students who typically did not demonstrate appropriate social skills in our regular classroom showed improved social skills when they were in a multiage setting. Appropriate social skills were based on the behaviors of students who we consider to have acceptable behaviors and from our past experiences with children.

We found that four children who struggled to control their behavior in the regular classroom, were able to show appropriate behavior within the multiage group. Lydia, Joshua, Latisha, and Maria all have had trouble conforming to individual classroom rules. However, when they were in the multiage group, their behavior met up to our expectations. Latisha and Lydia even became positive leaders of the group, sharing, responding, and listening with great interest.

Maria and Joshua demonstrated improved social skills, although at times, they were inconsistent. They did have more appropriate days than inappropriate. We were glad to see that they were able to work within a group situation.

Two other students, Wayne, and Rodney, were not successful in improving their behavior. These children are very teacher oriented students. They do not work well in a group

and are not self-guided. It was difficult for them to be accountable to three teachers. They found much of the multiage experience frustrating. The multiage setting did not seem to influence them towards improved social skills.

We were encouraged by the increase in appropriate social skills displayed by the majority of the students. We feel that this is due to the children being able to be active learners, using developmentally appropriate activities, positive peer pressure, and having choices in learning.

As the unit progressed we saw students gaining self confidence and an increased cooperative spirit. Some students who had never shared in front of the classroom before, felt comfortable enough to share with the entire multiage group. We believe all of these factors contributed to appropriate social skills.

Not only children influenced by the multiage program. It has an impact on parents as well. We know that parents can make or break a program. One of our parents expressed her excitement about being able to develop a connection with the same group of parents for more than one year. She felt that camaraderie between parents is important. We see this as a plus because we know that when parents are involved in their child's education it completes the triangle of learning between parent, teacher, and child.

The response of the multiage parents to the various activities has been overwhelming. In a building where there is typically little parental involvement, we have seen a majority of our parents attend special activities.

It was exciting for us to see the enthusiasm and positive attitudes of the students. They looked forward to working together. Many felt that they had more fun learning as well as acquiring more knowledge than in their regular classroom.

Because of the enthusiasm and the results of the first student survey, we were surprised that the results of the second survey changed. We thought that more students would want to be a part of a multiage classroom next year after experiencing the multiage unit. We thought the decrease was partly due to the fact that the first survey was given after we participated in

weekly non-assessed activities. The second survey was after an assessed academic unit was taught. The students were held accountable for their learning throughout the dinosaur unit. The multiage classroom became not just "fun time."

We realized that just prior to giving the survey the second time, a number of students had been disciplined for inappropriate behaviors. We felt that this may have invalidated the results of the fourth question. So we were glad that we gave the question about being in a multiage classroom for a third time.

As educators we were pleased to see our students having fun while learning. We found that we had fewer discipline problems. An effect that we had not counted on was that we were able to get to know the students on a more personal basis, and spend more one on one time with them. Our own attitudes became more positive as well.

Friendships increased between the multiage students. It was exciting to see relationships develop among different ages of children. We observed the students playing together more at recess and choosing to be with each other during special project times. The significance of students choosing to be with other aged children is a life skill. They will need to cooperate with people of different ages throughout their lifetime.

The elders were the only group that did not significantly increase the number of students wanting to be with children of different ages. We believe this is because a group of elders are individual learners. In the regular classroom they were only responsible for themselves, and in the multiage setting they were put into a leadership position which they found difficult to do.

The youngers had the largest increase in wanting to interact with other aged children. We felt this is because they received help and encouragement from the older students. This was stated by many students during the individual interviews.

The youngers were not afraid to assume leadership roles. This was shown during a reading activity where the youngers read to a group. We had not instructed any specific grade level to orally read the story. The youngers took charge of the assignment. Even students that

were not proficient readers felt comfortable enough to read aloud.

CONCLUSIONS

We are looking forward to starting a full time multiage classroom next year. We feel that because of the action research we have gained valuable knowledge, along with practical experiences which will only make our program next year stronger. We will continue to research and establish data on our discussed questions.

Even though our research was not academically based, we believe that if the student attends school, feels positive about what is happening in his/her learning environment, has appropriate social skills, and is able to develop multiage friendships then he/she will have most of the skills necessary to become an academic success.

We received a great deal of administrative help and guidance from our principal, Bruce Klonowski, and the Director of Curriculum in Elkhart Community Schools, Peggy Cowan. We met with them several times to discuss our program. They gave us helpful information, encouragement, and support. Our staff has been interested in our progress. We held several formal and informal meetings.

Reading a variety of articles, books, and our own action research was helpful . We attended the National Multiage Conference where we heard many educators speak about their multiage programs. We also visited Handley Elementary in LaPorte, IN. The teachers at Handley gave us many ideas and suggestions on implementing our own multiage class.

In our present teaching assignments we feel that the multiage approach will be a positive experience for students, parents, and ourselves. Children will be able to grow and develop at their own rate, without stress or the fear of failure. The learning environment will be community based, one where positive attitudes, cooperation, and respect will be expected. What a wonderful place where teachers and students alike will be able to learn and grow!

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//

INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIORS

Shouting out in class

Back talk

Not paying attention

Making Noises

Bothering others

Lying

Destroying property

Violent pictures

Not following directions

Refusal

Not in seat

Not keeping hands, feet, and objects to self

Stealing

Swearing

Gang symbols

APPENDIX A

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PARENT SURVEY #_____

Has your child talked to you about the projects we've done with the mult-iage grouping?
Circle one:

Never 1-3 times More than 3 times

Circle what you've heard about:

Italy Pumpkins Halloween Party Field Trips

Tye-dye shirts Crafts Gingerbread Revue

Apples Computer time Book Week Games

Bats Christmas party Dinosaur Day Math games

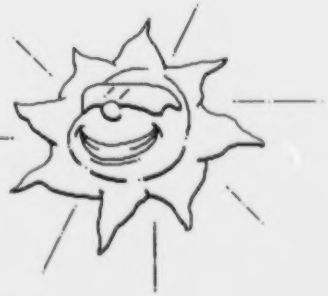
Leprechauns Writing P.E. Other _____

How does <u>your child</u> feel about being involved in a group of children 2-3 years younger or older?
Check one:

___ Fine- my child looks forward to it
___ Okay - seems to be all right
___ Not sure- hasn't said anything
___ Dislike - child is not enjoying it
___ No opinion

How do <u>you</u> feel about your child being involved in a group of children 2-3 years younger or older?
Check one:

___ Fine - it's a great opportunity
___ Okay - seems to be all right
___ Not sure - need to find out more about ___
___ Dislike - don't like the idea
___ No opinion



APPENDIX B

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STUDENT SURVEY

Do you talk to your parents about what we do as a multi-age group?

A LOT SOME NOT MUCH NEVER

How do you feel about being involved in a group of children with ages 2-3 years younger or older than you?

GREAT! GOOD NOT SURE DON'T LIKE IT

How do your parents feel about you being involved in a multi-age group?

GREAT! GOOD NOT SURE DON'T LIKE IT

Would you like to be in a class next year with children ages 2-3 years younger or older than you?

GREAT! GOOD NOT SURE DON'T LIKE IT

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INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What have you enjoyed about the multi-age activities we've done together?

2. What have you disliked about being involved in the multi-age group?

3. What would you like to do together as a group?

4. Do you think it would be a good idea to have a class like this?

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SOCIOGRAM QUESTIONS

Name _____

1. Name three people you would like to sit by.

_____ _____ _____

2. Who would you work on a project with if you both got the same award or punishment?

_____ _____ _____

3. If you were stranded on a desert island, who would you like to be there with?

_____ _____ _____

4. Who would you choose to lead you in an activity?

_____ _____

_____

5. Who would you tell a secret to?

_____ _____

_____

APPENDIX E

BEST COPY AVAILABLE